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Hacked Off: The Cyber Scandal Will Undermine Trump's Russian Reset

Both the president-elect and the Kremlin want the hacking issue to die. It won't.

By Matthew Kupfer

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It came suddenly and left many questions in its wake.

On Jan. 9, Reince Priebus, chief of staff to U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, announced that Trump had accepted Russian involvement in cyber attacks during the U.S. presidential election.

With a little over a week before his inauguration, the statement seemed to suggest an end to Trump's showdown with the United States' intelligence agencies over allegations of Russian hacking.

For months, the President-elect denied that Russia had played a role in hacking servers belonging to the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign and in leaking the pilfered files to WikiLeaks and others.

Trump even quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement that the Democratic Party used hacking accusations to excuse its electoral defeat. And when the Russian government declined to impose retaliatory sanctions after the US expelled 35 Russian diplomats in response to the cyber attacks, Trump declared President Vladimir Putin "very smart."

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As recently as last week, the President-elect mocked the intelligence community's assessment of the Russian hacks, tweeting that a briefing he was scheduled to receive on the hacking had been delayed because "perhaps more time [was] needed to build a case. Very strange!"

On the surface, one of the oddest chapters in American electoral history now appears to be drawing to a close. But Russia analysts believe the hacking scandal is far from over.

The cyber attacks will make "kissy-face diplomacy between Trump and Putin harder to initiate and sustain," political analyst Vladimir Frolov told The Moscow Times in an email. Trump's repeated denial of the hacks and his praise of Putin make him look like he is siding with an "avowed U.S. adversary" and even "paying Putin back for services rendered during the election."

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It's a dynamic that will undermine Trump, Frolov said, provided that Congress and the media maintain pressure on the President-elect.

That pressure seems likely to continue, says Amb. Stephen Sestanovich, a former State Department ambassador-at-large for the former Soviet Union. He predicts "a lot of resistance from Congress" should Trump not change his tune.

The question is what comes next.

Frolov believes the Kremlin wants the hacking scandal to die as soon as possible. "Escalation and more public exposure is not in Putin's interest," he said. Instead, the Kremlin seeks to "blame everything on the 'deranged Obama administration' and sore losers among the Democrats" and have a fresh start after Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration.

Trump's obfuscation on the hacking suggests that he too wants to put the issue behind him and begin a "reset" of U.S.-Russia relations.

But he may not get what he wants.

During a Jan. 5 interview with the PBS television channel, outgoing Vice-President Joe Biden implied that, beyond the United States' newest sanctions against Russia, other secret

measures are being taken. Sestanovich believes these could include tightening security, improving deterrence, and expanding options for retaliation.

"I don't believe the Panama Papers originated in actions by the U.S. government, but they're not a bad model, are they?" he told The Moscow Times by email. "Russian kleptocrats should be aware: Putin has launched a war that may eventually draw in a lot of other people."

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Meanwhile, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators has unveiled a "comprehensive" sanctions bill against Russia, largely focusing on the country's defense and intel sectors. And Democrats in the U.S. Congress are calling for the creation of an independent commission to investigate the alleged Russian hacking.

Sestanovich believes the Obama administration's December sanctions are just a start to the U.S. response – "designed to signal the gravity of the matter and the direction of future policy," he said. Given Republican and Democratic concern over the hacking, that direction may not change entirely under Trump.

Additionally, on Jan. 10, CNN reported that the U.S. intel chiefs had informed both Obama and Trump that Russian operatives may have compromising personal and financial information on the president-elect. Shortly thereafter, Buzzfeed published a series of unconfirmed dossiers – reportedly written by a former British intel operative – claiming that the Russian government had cultivated and supported Trump for years.

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Frolov thinks the Kremlin is worried.

The Russian decision makers likely do not believe they influenced the election's outcome, he said. Instead, they see Trump's victory as something that would have happened without their alleged hacking operation. But the Kremlin fears the hacking issue could derail Trump's plans for a reset with Russia.

"Now, perhaps, they may even regret the decision to leak the stuff," Frolov said.

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